



Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 20

Issue 1 *The 2015 International Conference on Religion
and Film in Istanbul*

Article 5

1-4-2016

Religious and National Identity in My Name is Khan

Kathleen M. Erndl

Florida State University, kerndl@fsu.edu

Recommended Citation

Erndl, Kathleen M. (2016) "Religious and National Identity in My Name is Khan," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 20 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol20/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

UNIVERSITY OF
Nebraska
Omaha

Religious and National Identity in *My Name is Khan*

Abstract

The Bollywood film, *My Name Is Khan* (2010) is the story of an Indian Muslim man, Rizwan Khan, with Asberger's Syndrome, living in the San Francisco area and married to an Indian Hindu woman, who, post 9/11, sets off on a journey across the United States to tell the President, "My name is Khan, and I'm not a terrorist." Filmed in lush settings in both India and the U.S., this high-budget production was a blockbuster both in India and abroad. For director Karan Johar, known for his highly successful glossy romantic dramas, such as *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998) and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gam* (2001), it was a significant departure, both in terms of theme and cinematography. Six months before the release of *My Name Is Khan*, the star of the film, Shah Rukh Khan, while on a trip to the U.S., was detained by Homeland Security in the Newark airport and questioned for about two hours, because his name, Khan, had triggered a security alert. In Mumbai, demonstrators from the militant Hindu party, Shiv Sena, threatened the opening of the film. These two incidents, while external to the content of the film itself, relate directly to the intended audiences and to the message of the film. *My Name is Khan*, a love story set in pre and post-9/11 U.S., is an attempt to dispel stereotypes about Muslims for a Western, primarily North American, audience. Equally important is the message for the Indian audience of national unity, interreligious harmony and cooperation, in the wake of the Mumbai bombings of 26/11 (Nov. 26, 2008), while at the same time celebrating distinctive Muslim, as well as Hindu, religious identities. This paper explores ways in which Muslim images, practices, and beliefs—such as recitation of Bismillah, daily public prayer and wearing of prayer caps, *hijab* for women, giving of alms, the story of Abraham and Ishmael, and the pervasive Sufiana musical score—along with selected Hindu and American (especially African-American) motifs, are highlighted, reinterpreted, and re-contextualized. *My Name is Khan*, while navigating a minefield of problematic representations and cultural stereotypes, presents an identity that is at once both Muslim and Indian, while at the same time promoting a vision of universal humanity.

Author Notes

Kathleen M. Erndl is Associate Professor of Religion at the Florida State University, where she teaches courses on South Asian religions. Her research interests include Hindu Goddess worship, Hindu women's religious practices, Hindu-Muslim interactions, and popular Indian cinema. She is a fan of Shahrukh Khan.

My Name Is Khan (2010, directed by Karan Johar) is a Bollywood film about an Indian Muslim man, Rizwan Khan (played by Shahrukh Khan) with Asberger's Syndrome, living in the San Francisco area and married to an Indian Hindu woman, Mandira Rathore (played by Kajol), who, post 9/11, sets off on a journey across the United States to meet the President and tell him, "My name is Khan, and I'm not a terrorist." Filmed in lush settings in both India and the U.S., this high-budget film was a blockbuster both in India and abroad and, at the time, was the largest grossing Indian film in overseas markets. For director Karan Johar, a Hindu, who was known for his highly successful glossy romantic dramas, such as *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998) and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gam* (2001), *MNIK* was a significant departure, both thematically and in terms of his replacement of diegetic music and song and dance numbers with a background musical score featuring Sufi-inspired lyrics. For actor Shahrukh Khan, a Muslim, the role was a bit of a departure as well. In the dozens of films he has made (89 credits listed in IMDB), he has played a Muslim role in only two previous films, *Hey Ram* (2000, directed by Kamal Haasan) and *Chak De! India* (2007, directed by Shimit Amin). Both of these films, in addition to *MNIK*, also depart from the Raj/Rahul type of romantic hero for which SRK became famous. Johar himself has said in interviews that the message of *MNIK* is very simple, and can be summed up in the words of Rizwan's mother, "There are two kinds of people, good people and bad people. Good people do good things, and bad people do bad things."

Six months before the release of *MNIK*, on Aug. 14, 2009, Shahrukh Khan, while on a trip to the U.S. to promote the film and to participate in Indian Independence Day celebrations, was detained and questioned by Homeland Security in the Newark airport because his name, Khan, had triggered a security alert (Shahrukh detained..., 2009). In

Mumbai, India, the opening of the film on February 12, 2010, was threatened by militant Shiv Sena demonstrators, who accused SRK of treason for his comments about Pakistani cricket players (Marpakwar and Dube, 2010). These two incidents, ironically mirroring the theme of the film, relate directly to its intended audiences and messages. *My Name is Khan*, a story of love and the quest for justice, set in pre and post-9/11 U.S., is on one hand an attempt to dispel stereotypes about Muslims for a Western, primarily North American, audience. Equally important is the message for the Indian audience of national unity, interreligious harmony and cooperation, in the wake of the Mumbai bombings of 26/11 (Nov. 26, 2008), while at the same time celebrating distinctive Muslim, as well as Hindu, religious identities. In this essay, I argue that *My Name is Khan*, while navigating a minefield of problematic representations and cultural stereotypes, uses the journey of Rizwan Khan to present an identity that is at once both Muslim and Indian, while at the same time envisioning a utopian ideal of a common humanity. The bulk of the paper will explore the way in which Muslim images, practices, and beliefs—such as recitation of Bismillah, daily public prayer and wearing of prayer caps, *hijab* for women, giving of alms, the story of Abraham and Ishmael, and the pervasive Sufiana background musical score—are highlighted, reinterpreted, and re-contextualized in *My Name Is Khan*.

Representations of Muslims in Hindi Cinema

While it is difficult to generalize about portrayals of Muslims over the last century in such a large film industry, I refer the reader to a recent edited volume, *Muslim culture in Indian cinema* (Jain, 2011), for a sense of the range of Muslim themes. It is safe to say

that, with few exceptions, Muslims are seldom depicted as villains in Indian films, as they often are in Western, especially American cinema. This is largely due to the Indian censor board, which restricts material derogatory to religious or caste minorities, as well as to the general ethos among Indian filmmakers that promotes the Indian nationalist ideal of a pluralistic and unified society. Up until recently there were generally two types of depictions. The first was found in the Islamicate historical films or in the modern family dramas called “Muslim Socials” which explored the domestic lives of a religious and cultural minority in India (Dwyer, 2006:97-131). The second was in more mainstream popular films in which Hindu identity is tacitly assumed, and Hindu characters predominate. In these films, Muslims feature often as stock characters in films with predominately Hindu or secular themes, as a way of demonstrating tolerance and plurality in Indian society. The *qawwal* (Sufi singer), the *tawwaif* (courtesan), the lumber salesman, and the kind uncle or friend, are ubiquitous in these films (Jain, 2011; Dwyer, 2006: 132-161.)] Arguing against scholars such as Kalyani Chadha and Anandam Kavoori (2008) who characterize Indian cinema in general as “Othering” and promoting stereotypes of Muslims in a Hindu-centric society, and to some extent following Vinay Lal (2008), Pankaj Jain, through a survey of films on Hindu-Muslim themes over the last several decades has concluded, “In their entire history, Indian films have built upon the legacy of Gandhian social harmony and Nehruvian nationalism and secularism” (2011: 357).

The theme of Partition, the division of the country into India and Pakistan on religious grounds at the end of British colonial rule in 1947, with the displacement and trauma that ensued, has been the backdrop of much of Indian cinema, implicitly or explicitly. Bhaskar Sarkar in his study *Mourning the nation: Indian cinema in the wake of*

partition (2009) argues eloquently that the deafening silence about Partition in the first decades after Independence is a type of mourning, while the emergence of Partition narratives since the 1980s reflects disillusionment with the achievements of the Indian nation-state. On the Indian domestic front, films dealing with Hindu-Muslim riots, particularly those before and after the destruction of the Babri masjid (mosque), which Hindu nationalists claimed to be the birthplace of Rama, on Dec. 6, 1992, have emerged. An example of this type of film is *Bombay* (directed by Mani Ratnam, 1995), which explores the marriage and family of a Tamil Hindu-Muslim couple against the backdrop of the 1992-93 Bombay riots.

In the last 15 years, another type of film with Hindu-Muslim themes has emerged, in response to both international and domestic terrorism. The first type explores Islamic terrorists and includes such films as *Kurbaan* (2009, directed by Rensil D'Silva) and *New York* (2009, directed by Kabir Khan), set in the U.S., and *Fanaa* (2006, directed by Kunal Kohli), set in India. The second type promotes the overcoming of religious and other boundaries and includes *Chak De! India* (2007, directed by Shimit Amin) and *Veer-Zaara* (2004, directed by Yash Chopra). *My Name is Khan* combines these two approaches, and along with other films, has generated a public conversation in India about representations of Muslims in popular culture.¹

¹ A television special on NDTV (We the people: Being Muslim in today's India, 2010) featured Shahrukh Khan, Karan Johar, and other filmmakers and public intellectuals on this topic.

Rizwan's Journey

Although there is no evidence that director Karan Johar ever read anthropologist Victor Turner, the character of Rizwan Khan and his journey across the U.S. are practically textbook examples of Turner's concept of liminality (Turner, 1969, 1974). Taken from the word *limen*, which means threshold, Turner at first used the term liminality to refer the middle phase of initiatory rituals or "rites of passage", as described by Arnold van Gennep, in which the initiate is removed from society, stripped of status, and undergoes various ordeals, afterward to emerge transformed and integrated into society with a new status. Turner later expanded the concept to apply to an initiatory quality in all rituals and even more generally to certain types of people (tricksters and ascetics, for example) and social processes (theater, festival, pilgrimage) that embody an anti-structural impulse to counterbalance the structures of society.

Rizwan himself is a liminal character in several ways. First, he has Asperger's Syndrome, a neurological condition on the autism spectrum. His affliction, or special talent, depending on how one looks at it, make some otherwise improbable plot points in the story possible. Most notably, he takes his wife literally, when, in her grief, she tells him to tell the President his name is Khan, and he is not a terrorist. His aversion to the color yellow, to being touched, and to being in unfamiliar situations along with his inability to understand jokes and innuendo, to cry and express emotion, and to tell lies, as well as his rigid adherence to routine, make his relationships difficult and cause others to see him as different or even shun him. His Asperger's even explains why he does not carry a cell phone: he is convinced that the radiation kills bees, which will eventually result in the

destruction of the human race. While his neurological make-up limits his interactions with others, it also conveys on him almost “magical” powers, his prodigious memory and ability to “repair almost anything.”

Secondly, Rizwan is a member of the Muslim minority in India, a status that is liminal or marginal at certain times, such as times of riots or crisis. Certainly, Muslims are not liminal within their own communities, which comprise about 13% of the Indian population, and much of Indian history has seen relative cooperation and harmony between Hindus and Muslims. But in the highly politicized atmosphere since Partition, many Muslims living in India are “betwixt and between,” to use Turner’s language, and at least by some Hindus are viewed as being loyal to Pakistan. Shahrukh Khan himself, as the “Badshah of Bollywood,” has been at pains to emphasize his patriotism to India (Vishwanathan, 2011) and to balance his pride in being Muslim with his secularism (Khan, 2013).

Finally, Rizwan after coming to the U.S. is even further out of his element. At first, his “otherness” is concentrated on his being an Indian, a foreigner in a strange land. He bonds with Mandira over their shared trials and tribulations of making a life as immigrants in the U.S., encapsulating this experience in an off-key duet of the song “Hum honge kaamyab” (“We Shall Overcome;” more about this song later). He achieves some normality and happiness in his life, after marriage, with family, friends, and work. It is only after 9/11 that he is once again thrust into a highly liminal status, as his life falls apart. His wife loses her business, his stepson is bullied at school and loses his best friend, and then finally there is the tragedy that forces him on a journey across the country. The proliferation of hate crimes in the U.S. post 9/11 against Muslims, and those erroneously

perceived as Muslims, such as Sikhs, is well documented, as is the perpetuation of stereotypes about Islam. Several of these are featured in the film, such as a school teacher teaching her class that “Islam is the most violent of all religions.” Having grown up in a much earlier era, when Communism, not Islam, was viewed a major threat to the “American way of life,” I do not recall being taught much of anything about Islam in school, and I at first thought this depiction was exaggerated. However, my students who saw the film and who were in middle school post 9/11, said that in fact this was not exaggerated. Two even reported that a teacher harassed a Muslim student in their class and taunted him about being a terrorist. The student’s name was Khan. The term “Islamophobia” has received much attention in recent years, particularly since 9/11, in the media, and even in scholarly literature, referring to an ingrained fear and hatred, among westerners, particularly Americans, of Muslims and all things Islamic (Gottschalk and Greenburg 2007; Green 2015). Muslim men, especially, are associated with violence, and Muslim women are inscribed as victims of oppression. *My Name is Khan* is a particularly Indian response to Islamophobia.

Rizwan’s journey is a pilgrimage, a sacred journey to attain justice/redemption not only for himself and his family, but also for Muslims, Indians, and humanity as a whole. The film begins, predictably enough, in an airport, in the spring of 2008, as Rizwan is about to board a plane to Washington, D.C. to meet the President. Throughout much of the film, an intermittent voiceover of Rizwan writing dairy entries addressed to Mandira links together a series of flashbacks ranging from his childhood to his departure on the journey. But his flight does not go as planned. He is detained by Homeland Security long enough to miss his flight. His ticket is not refundable, and he does not have the money to buy

another. This is the first in a series of obstacles, as he rides buses and hitchhikes, making money by fixing cars (and “almost anything”) along the way in search of the elusive President, whom he always seems to have just missed. At one point, he stops at a motel, stereotypically owned by a Gujarati, who at first welcomes him as a fellow Indian when he speaks Hindi. The motel owner apparently assumes Rizwan is Hindu, but then makes a disparaging remark about Muslims being terrorists, leading Rizwan to say, “My name is Khan, and I’m not a terrorist.” Along the way, he stops in a rural African-American community in Georgia, where he makes friends with Mama Jenny and her son, whom he calls “Funny-hair Joel.” He bonds with the community in church, memorializing “martyrs” in the war, including his son Sam, culminating in a rousing chorus of “We Shall Overcome.” Some critics have deemed this segment extraneous, but it segues to one of the major themes in the film, linking Indian Muslims with African Americans, which I discuss below.

Rizwan finally does catch a glimpse of the elusive President Bush, who is speaking at a college in Los Angeles. But he is not able to meet him, as he is arrested, detained, and interrogated by the FBI. During this time, news of his incarceration becomes a *cause celebre* due to media exposure instigated by two Indian Hindu broadcasting students and an Indian Sikh T.V. journalist who had shaved his beard and stopped wearing a turban after 9/11 to avoid being mistaken for a Muslim. Finally, the American Autistic Society contacts a judge who orders Rizwan’s release. Glimpsing Mandira, who has come to pick him up, he does not join her, or return home, as his journey to meet the President, which has grown to mythic proportions, is still incomplete.

Worship: Puja and Namaaz

When Mandira and Rizwan decide to get married, his brother, Zakir, who has always had mixed feelings of resentment and guilt concerning Rizwan, disowns him, saying, “They are Hindus; they are different from us.” They marry in a civil ceremony with some Indian cultural touches, such as dancing and clothing, that are overtly neither Hindu nor Muslim. (Zakir’s wife, Haseena, does attend the wedding; more about this below.) After marriage, Rizwan and Mandira fall into a comforting, harmonious routine. They move into a new home. Mandira opens her own beauty salon, called Mandira Khan, reflecting her hybrid identity as Hindu with a Muslim husband. They celebrate the opening of the salon with a (Western secular) ribbon cutting ceremony and with the breaking of a coconut, a ritual adopted from Hindu temple practice, which is also customary when beginning production on a Bollywood film. Mandira’s son and Rizwan’s step-son, Sameer, bond over video games. They become not only a family, but also a model for what human society can be. This ideal is visually conveyed through a montage of their daily activities, beginning in the morning with their respective religious practices. Rizwan, wearing a prayer cap, bows in the living room, performing his morning *namaaz*, one of the five daily Muslim prayers. Mandira performs her *puja*, Hindu worship before an image of a Hindu deity, holding a tray of flower and food offerings and a lighted oil lamp, which she waves in front of the deity in a ritual called *arati*. She teasingly feeds her mock-reluctant son a bite of sweet, the *prasad*, or consecrated blessing from the offering. All of these scenes flow as one long series of montages, with very little dialogue in-between, beginning with the wedding, and ending with a typical morning send-off of Sameer to school. The song

that plays throughout in the background is titled *Sajda*, an Arabic word that in Urdu and Hindi refers specifically to the act of bowing down in the direction of Mecca for the daily Muslim prayer, but also more generally to bowing down and totally committing oneself to someone or something. In romantic and Sufi poetry, often indistinguishable, *sajda* is the act of total devotion to one's beloved, human or divine.

The song *Sajda*, along with other songs in the film, with its mystical Islamic (Sufi) overtones, highlights and reinforces the largely Muslim visual imagery and language in the film. In almost every scene, Rizwan is marked as Muslim, whether through the wearing of a prayer cap or the recitation of the *Bismillah* or another prayer. Mandira is a Hindu, to be sure, but her Hindu-ness is largely unmarked. The Indian audience knows she is Hindu immediately from her first name, Mandira. A Western audience is unlikely to be aware of this fact until Zakir's outburst that "they (Hindus) are different than us." It had been revealed that her ex-husband's surname was Rathore, denoting a Hindu Rajput (royal) caste from Rajashtan, but it is never revealed what Mandira's maiden name was, though one would assume she is from the same caste, as it has been an arranged marriage. This is implicit, rather than highlighted. Mandira and Rizwan relate to each other immediately as fellow Indians, speaking to each other in Hindi from their first meeting. While Rizwan is visibly Muslim in most every scene, there is little that shows Mandira wearing Hindu symbols or engaging in Hindu practices. Aside from the morning *puja* scene, and a brief shot of a friend placing a *tika* on their foreheads when they enter their new house, there is only one other overtly Hindu practice, which, however, is easily missed. After Sameer has died in the hospital of internal injuries from a vicious racially motivated attack on the soccer field, in the next scene Mandira weeps over Sameer's body in what appears to be

his bedroom. A close up gradually zooms out to reveal Sameer's mattress on the floor, apparently in observance of the Hindu custom of moving a dying or just deceased person's body to the ground. But the room is darkened, and the shot is so fleeting, that unless one is looking for it, it is easy to miss, especially for a non-Indian audience. While Rizwan recites the traditional Islamic prayer ((*inna lillah wa inna ilayhi raje'oun*) upon hearing of Sameer's death, Mandira is not shown reciting any Hindu prayers or conducting a Hindu funeral ceremony. Nor are her very few Hindu practices explained or commented upon in any way.

Rizwan's Muslim religious practices, on the other hand, are highlighted and foregrounded. Numerous shots show him kneeling and bowing in *namaaz*. During a memorial service for the victims of 9/11, he recites prayers in Arabic, while onlookers react uneasily, and characterizes his donation to the relief fund as *zakat*, the obligatory almsgiving that is one of the Five Pillars of Islam. One scene in particular foregrounds the reluctance of some Muslims living in the U.S. to pray in public, for fear of attracting curiosity or hostile attention. Rizwan, while riding a bus across country, is befriended by a young Muslim couple. The audience knows that they are Muslim, because the wife is wearing *hijab*, headcovering, and that they are South Asian—Indian or Pakistani—because they speak to each other in Urdu. While in a rest-stop café, Rizwan looks at his watch, puts on his prayer cap and starts to get up, saying it is “*namaaz* time.” The two of them glance nervously at each other, and the husband says, in an embarrassed tone, “*namaaz* should be done according to the people and the place.” Rizwan replies, “No, *namaaz* is done according to one's intention (*niyat*).” He bows down in prayer in the parking lot, another man joining him, while passengers standing near the bus stare or photograph them. Here,

Rizwan's Asperger's comes into play, for in addition to following a strict regimented schedule, never lying, and not being able to understand jokes or irony, it allows him to express his religiosity without the filter of self-conscious embarrassment that neurotypical people may feel. The song playing in the background off and on during this scene, as well as before and after it, and continuing across the desert landscape of Joshua Tree State Park, is *Nur-e-Khuda* (Light of God).

Another scene shows Rizwan's conflict with other Muslims over the "true interpretation" of Islam, acknowledging that some Muslims justify violence on religious grounds, while emphatically denying the validity of such justifications. Having crisscrossed the country, Rizwan arrives in Los Angeles, where President George W. Bush is scheduled to make a speech. He takes refuge in a mosque where he overhears a political leader, Dr. Faisal Rahman, incite his followers with violent rhetoric, invoking the story of a stranger's demand that Abraham sacrifice his son Ishmael to God. Rizwan interrupts, saying that Rahman is wrong, that the point of the story as his mother told it to him is that God is merciful. One of Rahman's companions asks Rizwan who the stranger was who spoke to Abraham. Rizwan replied "Shaitan (Satan)", took out the stones he carried in his pocket (as worry beads), and threw them in the direction of Rahman. This act mirrors the ritual stoning of Satan that is a necessary part of the *Hajj*, the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, and is another example of Rizwan's journey as a kind of sacred pilgrimage.

Haseena, Hijab, and Representations of Muslim Women

The two female Muslim characters, Rizwan's mother, Razi, and his sister-in-law, Haseena, are strong influences on Rizwan, helping him to cope with his Asperger's and develop his special talents. They defy prevalent Western stereotypes of Muslim women, while contributing to the aesthetic of the film. Rizwan's mother had been left a widow with two small sons, Rizwan, and his infant brother, Zakir, whom she supported by doing traditional needle embroidery (*zari*). A shot of her punching a needle from behind a sequin-studded translucent cloth adds a stunning visual dimension to the moral upbringing she gives to Rizwan. Although she was uneducated, and Rizwan's condition was undiagnosed as he grew up in Bombay, she knew instinctively that he required special attention and lavished him with unconditional love. When the boys at school bullied him, she cajoled a retired Parsi (Zoroastrian) schoolmaster, Mr. Wadia, to take him on as a private pupil, and he excelled in his studies. It was in Mr. Wadia's home that he devised a bicycle-powered pump to pump the water out of the flooded courtyard and discovered that he could, in the words that later appear on a sign as he hitch-hikes across the U.S., "Repair Almost Anything." She lavishes so much attention on Rizwan and expresses so much pride in his accomplishments, that younger brother Zakir, who is also bright and accomplished, feels neglected and resentful. During the 1983 Hindu-Muslim riots (not as famous as the 1992-93 riots, but needed for the timeframe of the film), when he came home parroting derogatory slurs about Hindus that he had heard on the street, his mother sat him down and drew two figures, one threatening with a stick, and one offering a lollipop. Asking him to identify which one is Hindu and which is Muslim, she said, "There are only two kinds of

people, good people and bad people. Good people do good things, and bad people do bad things.” She tells him that she wants him to be happy in life, and he strives to fulfill his mother’s wish throughout the film. While Razia does embody the ideal Mother figure, so ubiquitous in Bollywood films, she at the same time contravenes stereotypes through her assertiveness and insistence on a universal moral code.

It is after moving to the U.S. upon his mother’s death that Rizwan meets his brother’s wife Haseena, who is instrumental in his adjustment to life in the U.S. She is presented as very much an equal partner with her husband and in some ways the leader of the family, not in any way servile or submissive. She is a professional woman, a psychologist who teaches in a university. In a phone conversation with his mother, Zakir says that the reason they were not able to come home to India for the Id festival is that it was in the middle of Haseena’s term. Her husband does not control her activities in any way, and they have a relationship based on mutual respect. Her career as a professor—he is an executive in a cosmetics company—is just as important as his. When Rizwan is incarcerated, it is she who speaks to the media. It is her professional expertise, after observing Rizwan’s mannerisms and “meltdown” when seeing the color yellow, that leads her to take him to an autism specialist, who diagnoses him with Asperger’s Syndrome. She shows him how to use the video camera that serves as a buffer between him and new, frightening, experiences, helping him to function in a neuro-typical world. Born in the U.S. of South Asian (presumably Indian) Muslim parents, she acts as an intermediary between Rizwan and Zakir, explaining to Zakir that their mother instinctively knew what Rizwan needed and was largely responsible for his high functioning. Her authority is

further accentuated through her voiceover during the scene explaining Rizwan's condition. She is the only character in the film, besides Rizwan, with a voiceover.

Haseena is not only intelligent, self-confident, and compassionate, she is also portrayed as being open and tolerant to people of other religions and cultures. As a professor, she teaches students from all different backgrounds and comes into contact with a wider range of people than does her husband. While Zakir disowns Rizwan for his marriage to a Hindu, Haseena, surprisingly turns up at the wedding ceremony. There is no scene of her arguing with Zakir about this, providing any rationale, or suggesting conversion for Mandira. She simply shows up, with a tray of sweets and flowers in hand, embraces Mandira, and confidently and joyfully walks beside Rizwan as the representative of his family. As a female Muslim character, she breaks down artificial dichotomies between "traditional" and "modern", "secular" and "religious."

That Haseena wears a head covering (*hijab*) is unremarkable and unremarked upon until after 9/11, when an angry man violently knocks her down in the hallway at her university, saying "you people" should "go home." That she is an American-born U.S. citizen in a country espousing freedom of religion and freedom of expression is irrelevant in his hate-filled diatribe. Shaken, she tearfully accepts Zahir's suggestion that "Allah will understand" if she stops wearing *hijab* in public. It is this incident that reunites the two brothers, and brings them together as a family; the viewer (at least the Hindi-speaking viewer) knows immediately that Zahir regrets disowning his brother and finally accepts Mandira into the family when he addresses her as *bhabhi* (elder brother's wife). During Rizwan's incarceration, subsequent media attention, and public embracing of Rizwan's

cause, Haseena resumes wearing *hijab*. She explains to her class that the *hijab* is not just an expression of her religion, it is her reality (*wajud*); it is who she is.

“We Shall Overcome”: Indians, Muslims, and African Americans

After his release from detention, Rizwan hears that Wilhemina, Georgia, home of his friends Mama Jenny and “Funny-hair” Joel, has been struck by a massive hurricane. Taking a major detour from his search for the President, he rushes to Wilhemina and finds that his friends, injured, low on supplies, and ignored by authorities, have taken refuge from the rising flood waters in the church. This is the same church where they had sung “We Shall Overcome.” Emblematic of the filmmakers’ message, “We Shall Overcome,” the only song without Sufi-inspired lyrics in the film, is perhaps the most famous anthem of the American civil rights movement. Translated into Hindi as *Hum Honge Kaamyab*, it is well-known in India and taught to school children as an expression of national unity and the overcoming of poverty and the sense of inferiority inculcated by British colonialism in India. (It is so ubiquitous that I also remember learning the Indian version in Hindi classes in both India and the U.S.) Although the contexts are historically quite different, the song highlights a commonality of experience between African Americans in the U.S. and Muslims in both India and the U.S., and a sense of the obstacles and struggle facing both groups. While the film is open to the criticism of racial stereotyping in these scenes, it does recall the experience of poor, mostly African American communities in Louisiana during Hurricane Katrina. Seen through Rizwan’s eyes, his friends in this rural community are “good people, who do good things.” The filmmakers go out of their way to avoid the

portrayal of all African American characters as good and all white American characters as bad. In an attempt to be racially balanced, the older boys shown to attack Sameer on the soccer field include African Americans. There is also a scene, probably the most unlikely scene in the film, in which an African American woman denies Rizwan's entry to a Christian charity fundraiser for the "poor children of Africa."

In Wilhemina, Rizwan again uses his special skills, helping to fortify the structure of the church and again building a device to pump out the floodwater. In a dramatic scene, with the song "Allah-i-Rahim" (merciful God) in the background, a group of Indian Muslims, led by Haseena, and Zahir, arrive in Wilhemina, wading through the water, carrying loads of food and supplies. Rizwan's stay is cut short when he is stabbed by a follower of Dr. Faisal Rahman, the terrorist whom Rizwan had earlier reported to the FBI. While he floats in and out of consciousness, the new President is elected. The film makes much, through headlines and news reports in English and Hindi of the first election of an African American President. So, when Rizwan finally meets the President, or rather, President-elect, it is Obama who seeks him out, calls him by name, and declares that he is not a terrorist. This brings Rizwan's journey to a successful conclusion, as he and Mandira return home.

Conclusion

In an essay entitled, “Being a Khan,” in *Outlook Turning Points* (2013), Shahrukh Khan wrote:

We create little image boxes of our own. One such box has begun to draw its lid tighter and tighter at present. It is the box that contains an image of my religion in millions of minds. I encounter this tightening of definition every time moderation is required to be publically expressed by the Muslim community in my country. Whenever there is an act of violence in the name of Islam, I am called upon to air my views on it and dispel the notion that by virtue of being a Muslim, I condone such senseless brutality. I am one of those voices chosen to represent my community in order to prevent other communities from reacting to all of us as if we were somehow colluding with or responsible for the crimes committed in the name of a religion that we experience entirely differently from the perpetrators of these crimes.

He also discussed his family life with his Hindu wife and hybrid children, saying, “The only disagreements I have with Gauri concern the colour of the walls in our living room and not about the locations of walls demarcating temples from mosques in India” (Khan, 2013). As an ideological work, *My Name is Khan* is an attempt to expose and critique the situation Khan describes in the first statement and to expand and promote as a utopian vision his sentiment in the second. It does so through a highly aesthetic visual and aural

presentation of Muslim practice, centered on the journey of the liminal character Rizwan Khan, who leaves home on a mission, encounters almost insurmountable obstacles, achieves his goal, and returns home to a transformed reality. The marriage of Rizwan and Mandira, like that of their real life counterparts, Shahrukh and Gauri, is a model for the unity among diverse people of India and, by extension, the world.²

In this essay, I have analyzed *My Name is Khan* as a visual, filmic text with an emphasis on the authorial intentions of the director, screenwriter, cinematographer, music director, and actors. Research on audience reception, such as the media ethnography study in Portland, Oregon and New Delhi, India currently being conducted by communication scholar Priya Kapoor (2013), will help gauge the impact of the film and the degree of its success. I will say, anecdotally, that when I showed the film to a community and student group, largely Muslim, that the response was positive. After an almost three-hour long film, many stayed behind for another 45 minutes to discuss the film, recounting experiences they had had that were similar to those in the film. When I have shown the film to my American, mostly non-Muslim students, a common response is that the victimization of Muslims was a revelation to them and led them to be much more skeptical of the prevailing rhetoric about Islam. This raises important questions about the purposes and effects of film.

² See Lyden (2003), for an extensive discussion of film as embodying a unique worldview.

Bibliography

- Chadha, Kalyani, and Anandam P. Kavoori (2008). Exoticized, marginalized, demonized: The Muslim “Other” in Indian cinema. In Anandam P. Kavoori and Aswin Punathambekar (Eds.), *Global Bollywood* (pp. 131–145). New York: New York University Press.
- Chopra, Anupama (2007). *King of Bollywood: Shah Rukh Khan and the seductive world of Indian cinema*. New York: Warner.
- Desai, Jigna and Rajunder Dudrah (Eds.). (2008). *The Bollywood reader*. New York: Open University Press.
- Dwyer, Rachel (2006). *Filming the gods: Religion and Indian cinema*. New York: Routledge.
- Dwyer, Rachel (2014). *Bollywood’s India: Hindi cinema as a guide to contemporary India*. London: Reaktion.
- Ganti, Tejaswini (2013). *Bollywood: A guide to popular Hindi cinema*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.

Ganti, Tejaswini (2012). *Producing Bollywood: Inside the contemporary Hindi film industry*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Gehlawat, Ajay (2010). *Reframing Bollywood: Theories of popular Hindi cinema*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Gottschalk, Peter and Gabriel Greenburg (2007). *Islamophobia: Making Muslims the Enemy*. New York: Rowan and Littlefield.

Green, Todd (2015). *The Fear of Islam: An Introduction to Islamophobia in the West*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Hindu nationalists held after protests at 'pro-Pakistani' Bollywood star (2010, Feb. 10). *The Guardian*. Retrieved at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/feb/10/hindu-nationalists-shahrukh-khan-shiv-sena>.

Jain, Jasbir (Ed.) (2011). *Muslim culture in Indian cinema*. Jaipur: Rawat Publications.

Jain, Pankaj (2011). From Padosi to My Name is Khan: The portrayal of Hindu–Muslim relations in South Asian films. *Visual Anthropology*, 24(4), 345–363.

Kapoor, Priya (2013). *My Name is Khan: Media Ethnography among Muslim Youth*.
Unpublished research proposal.

Khan, Shahrukh (2013). Being a Khan. *Outlook Turning Points* .

Lal, Vinay (1998). The impossibility of the outsider in the modern Hindi film. In Ashis
Nandy (Ed.), *The secret politics of our desires: innocence, culpability and Indian
popular cinema* (ppp.228–259). London: Zed Books.

Lyden, John (2003). *Film as religion: Myth, morals, and rituals*. New York: NYU
Press.

Lutgendorf, Philip (2006). Is there an Indian way of filmmaking? *International Journal
of Hindu Studies*. 10(3), 227-256.

Mishra, Vijay (2001). *Bollywood cinema: Temples of desire*. London: Routledge.

Marpakwar, Prafulla and Bharati Dubey (2010, Aug. 13). Mumbai calls Sena bluff as
MNIK opens to full house. *Times of India*. Retrieved at
[timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/Mumbai-calls-Sena-bluff-as-MNIK-
opens-to-full-house/articleshow/5566662.cms](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/Mumbai-calls-Sena-bluff-as-MNIK-opens-to-full-house/articleshow/5566662.cms).

Rajadhyaksha, Ashish and Paul Willemen, (1999). *Encyclopedia of India cinema*, new revised edition. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Sarkar, Bhaskar (2009). *Mourning the nation: Indian cinema in the wake of Partition*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Shahrukh detained at US airport for being a Khan (2009, Aug. 15). *Hindustan Times*.

Retrieved at <http://www.hindustantimes.com/entertainment/shah-rukh-detained-at-us-airport-for-being-a-khan/article1-443511.aspx>.

Turner, Victor (1969). *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago: Aldine.

Turner, Victor (1974). *Dramas, fields and metaphors: Symbolic action in human society*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Viswanathan, Gita (2011). The star, the role, and the spectator: Shahrukh Khan's recalcitrant Muslim identity. In Jasbir Jain(Ed.) pp. 74-91. *Muslim culture in Indian cinema*. Jaipur: Rawat Publications.

We the people: Being Muslim in today's India (2010, Mar. 8). New Delhi: NDTV.